TWO CENTURIES OF WOMEN IN FICTION AND THE SEA: EXPLORING GENDER ROLES AND PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH IN ANGLO-AMERICAN FEMALE CHARACTERS

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Abstract

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This thesis analyzes the connection between the sea and the female identity as used in 19th and 20th century literature. Examining the works of Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, Charlotte Gilman, Kate Chopin and Virginia Woolf reveals the various ways these authors used ocean imagery to examine gender roles in their times. Historical context of women's psychological health is crucial in order to fully understand the evolution of gender roles through these time periods. The Victorian Era experienced a revolutionary social shift in the domestication of madness, which led to a sharp decline in women's autonomy over their own mental health. More than ever before, women were strictly confined in their own home or asylums at the mercy of male authority figures in their lives. The domestication of madness influenced some women authors to explore the female identity in their writing, using the ocean as a medium to explore topics like sexuality and independence.

This thesis is also in part a creative thesis. Inspired by Virginia Woolf's *The Waves,* poems act as interludes between sections and an original short story, *Salt*, acts as the final section to reflect the ocean's reflection of the present-day female identity.

I would like to first extend my sincerest thanks to Dr. MacKay and Dr. Bertelsen for providing me with endless insights and patience as well as to my friends and family for supporting me and sharing my excitement throughout this process. Finally, I am immensely grateful to the brave women authors whose writing is a testament that women are made of salt water.

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Introduction: Women and the Sea

"Mermaids...submerge themselves not to negate their power, but to conceal it"

– Nina Auerbach, *Romantic Imprisonment*

The relationship between ocean imagery and exploration of the female identity is a concept that permeates much of my own writing and I have always been entranced by the mythical characteristics that are tethered to the ebb and flow of tides. The female connection to the sea is an ancient one stretching back as far as Greek and Roman times; Aphrodite, the goddess of love, is born out of the waves, Odysseus and his men struggle to resist the sirens' seductive and deadly singing and sea nymphs populated Poseidon's kingdom. Other myths and folklore, like selkies and mermaids, tightly wove the female essence and the sea together. The ocean was regarded as the womb of the world, a wild and untamed entity, with strong feminine characteristics. However, the female identity in connection to the sea was not nurturing or peaceful but represented a male dehumanization of womanhood. Nina Auerbach argues that systematically, "the myth of womanhood was reduced to manufactured fantasies about woman's nature (inferior brain weight, tendency to brain fever if educated, ubiquitous maternal instinct, raging hormonal imbalance) meant to shackle women's inexperience to male convenience" ("Woman and the Demon," 12). Auerbach also argues that "woman's freedom is no longer simple imitation into historical integrity but the rebirth of mythic potential" and the repurposing of female-driven mythology and the ocean "become stronger endowments than oppressions" ("The Woman and the Demon," 12). It was not until later in literature – in the 19th and 20th century – that the female connection to the sea was popularized by female authors.

As men began exploring the seas and charting unknown courses to traverse the globe, women remained landlocked. With the expansion of the male sphere, the female sphere contracted as social

guidelines tightened in rigidity. While the Romantic period signals the beginning of the feminist literary movement, the Victorian Era became a dynamic stage to express it. The sharp rise of mental institutions paved the way for the sharp rise in women asylum patients, who were at the mercy of the male authority figures in their lives: brothers, fathers, and husbands as well as their doctors. In a world that seem to be dragging its women into more and more types of prison – the home, the institution, the bedroom – women writers responded to the shrinking female spheres by creating characters that sought freedom, internally and externally. The ocean became a poignant image writers utilized to explore their female characters' evolving female identity and guide on their journey of self-awareness and self-realization. Ultimately, I found this thesis topic compelling due to the realization that writers across a wide expanse of time used the ocean as a common medium to explore the impact gender roles and psychological health had on their female characters' identity.

In this thesis, I will examine the role of the ocean and related themes and imagery in analyzing the evolution of the female identity in 19th and 20th century Anglo-American women-authored literature. We will follow the thread beginning at Jane Austen's *Persuasion* to Charlotte Bronte's *Villette,* Charlotte Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and land in the literary canon of Virginia Woolf. Inspired by Woolf's revolutionary *The Waves*, chapter transitions are marked by my own pieces of creative writing that emphasize my reactions to the themes explored in the upcoming section. "Salt," the final section before my epilogue, is an original short story inspired by own reactions to the ocean as a medium to explore my own identity and what it means, to me, to be a woman in the present-day.

At its core, the sea is a wild creature. It follows the soothing rhythms of the tides but represents the vast unknown and ultimately, freedom. It is perhaps why drowning is associated closely with the feminine spirit: Virginia Woolf weighed her pockets down with rocks, Shakespeare's Ophelia drowns in a river and Mary Wollstonecraft attempted suicide by jumping into the Thames. There is an intimate relationship

between the female psyche and the nature of the water. The essence of the female identity can be explored, examined and clarified by using the ocean as medium to do so.

The ocean exerts a forceful presence in my own personal creative writing. I grew up spending each summer on the South Carolina shore of the Atlantic and have been influenced by its constant and consistent appearance in my life. I was inspired to use my thesis as a way to explore the female identity through the ocean in hopes to better understand how to explore the ever-shifting and evolving female gender role in the context of such a constant and persistent entity.

Ruth

With mermaid curled hair, a girl leans against the cold bricks.

Her lazy, creamy cigarette smoke spills through the night air --

vanilla Audrey Hepburn style glamour and her own milky way.

Her name is Ruth, wild and trapped and yearning for deep water and heavy tides.

Skirt slithering behind her,

red cowboy boots eating the ground with dancing twirls,

it is simple, natural, to imagine this wave tossed girl beckoning from a sea-prisoned rock to wanderlusting sailors.

“Come on in, the water’s warm.”

Chapter I: Jane Austen's *Persuasion* – Laying the Groundwork

"But I hate to hear you talking so, like a fine gentleman, and as if women were all fine ladies, instead of rational creatures. We none of us expect to be in smooth sailing all our days."

– Mrs. Croft to Captain Wentworth, *Persuasion*

Born December 16, 1775, Austen was the seventh child and second daughter of George and Cassandra Austen. According to *Memoir*, written by Austen's nephew (James) Edward Austen-Leigh with the help of his half-sister and sister, Austen enjoyed an idyllic, pastoral childhood. Austen-Leigh portrayed his aunt's home environment as a significant influence on the development of her writing talents. Jane Austen's father, an Oxford educated clergyman, tutored his daughters as well as his sons and literature was a popular discussion topic in the Austen family. Though Austen received formal education, her home life was a powerful shaping force on her writing and as noted by her twentieth-century editor R.W. Chapman, she was "exceptionally and even surprisingly dependent" on reality and "family and biographical truth" as the "basis of imaginary construction" ("Jane Austen," 5). Though Austen's education was mostly informal, her sharp observations of her social environment lent her a nuanced perspective on traditional gender roles. As an "artist of contentedly clipped wings" ("Romantic Imprisonment," 4), Austen's strong prose and wit allowed her to express emotional depth and subtle yet poignant social critiques of the restricted mobility of women of her time in her writing. Despite Austen's limited scope, she expertly navigated her sphere of literary influence, creating stories that while not overtly or radically feminist, nevertheless addressed the complexities of the evolving female identity in her time.

Austen's most emphatic analysis of the limitations of gender roles is expressed in *Persuasion*, specifically in her utilization of the Royal Navy as a vehicle for providing women with a newfound source of freedom from the rigid social rules of the landed gentry. As her last book, finished in early 1817 just several months before Austen's death, *Persuasion* represents a sharp break from her previous literary patterns. Her protagonist, Anne Elliot, is 27 years old and still unmarried despite two suitors' proposals over the years. At Lady Russell's insistence, she ends her engagement to Frederick Wentworth, a young and poor navy officer, which serves as a catalyst for Anne's subsequent physical and emotional decline. Anne's regret over breaking the engagement "clouded over every enjoyment of youth" and led to her "early loss of bloom and spirits" ("Persuasion," 28). Unlike Austen's other novels, *Persuasion* brings the consequences of traditional gender roles sharply into focus as the central conflict. Previously in Austen's work, achieving social harmony was a plot device that brought the protagonists happiness instead of emotional turmoil. Yet in *Persuasion*, Anne's sacrifice that she made to satisfy Lady Russell is the catalyst for her severe depression and passivity.

In her family's eyes, Anne's identity is so deeply rooted in her status as a woman past eligible marrying age that her father and sisters assign little significance to her intrinsic qualities. To the Elliot family, she is "only Anne" despite her "elegance of mind and sweetness of character, which must of placed her high with any people of real understanding" ("Persuasion," 5). Sir Walter's relationships with his daughters is anchored to their ability to "marry suitably," as Elizabeth, who still retains much of her charm and looks despite being twenty-nine, will one day do. He is unimpressed with Anne's lack of prospects and frustrated by Mary's marriage into an old, wealthy country family, instead of a family with higher ranking, and that she has "therefore *given* all the honour, and received none" ("Persuasion," 5). Sir Walter's callous view of his daughters' worth in terms of their social mobility and physical appearance is representative of the larger societal perspective at play. Austen highlights the dark side of the most important gender role

that woman of the time and class had to fulfill – advancing the status of their families through an acceptable marriage. Women who fail to secure a husband, such as Anne, are seen as inconsequential.

In the beginning of *Persuasion,* Anne Elliot lacks a significantly fulfilling purpose or autonomy over her own life. The Elliot family is in a tailspin of financial decline as they struggle to pay creditors and debt, despite Anne's persistent attempts to shift her father's priorities to managing the finances. Anne who "considered it an act of indispensable duty to clear away the claims of creditors" ("Persuasion," 12) collaborates with Lady Russell to present a detailed retrenchment plan to Sir Walter, which he rejects on the grounds that he would rather quit Kellynch-hall than "live no longer with the decencies even of a private gentleman!" ("Persuasion," 13). Inspired by his vehement response, Mr. Shepherd, the family's lawyer, and Lady Russell work to persuade Sir Walter to allow tenants to take over the family home, which he soon agrees to. As the soon-to-be displaced family debates where to relocate, Lady Russell argues for Bath, justifying her preference as the location with the best climate for Anne's health and spirits, and the larger society would increase Anne's visibility. However, Anne disliked Bath and preferred to stay in the neighborhood. Lady Russell "felt obliged to oppose her dear Anne's known wishes," confident that Anne's dislike of Bath was rooted in "prejudice and a mistake" ("Persuasion," 18). Lady Russell's dismissal of Anne's wishes in favor of her own fondness for Bath highlights Anne's inability to enact agency in her own life decisions. This significant change in Anne's life is decided by those around her, as are most significant choices.

Mary, Anne's sister, entreats Anne to visit her family at Uppercross, where the residents participate in a cyclical pattern of conflict directed by Mary's frequent complaints of illnesses and tendency to place her responsibilities on the shoulders of others, namely Anne. Despite this dichotomy, Anne is eager to leave Kellynch for Uppercross in order avoid relocating to Bath, and she is also motivated by being "thought of some use, glad to have anything marked out as a duty" ("Persuasion," 33). Anne's desire for purpose

highlights one of the most prominent differences between men and women of Austen's time, namely men's ability to seek fulfilling careers, work and projects that exist outside the domestic sphere. While women were confined to their roles as daughters, wives and mothers, men had the opportunity to not only seek work outside the home but as had become prominent in Austen's time, at sea.

As marine commerce expanded in the 1700s and early 1800s, the British social hierarchy experienced an increase in fluidity. Access to maritime trade allowed men of lower social ranks to earn profits that advanced their station. This was also true of the Royal Navy; now men born into lower classes could reach higher ranks of society that might have been previously inaccessible to them. Austen was intimately familiar with the Navy's influence as two of her brothers, Francis and Charles, entered into service. Austen's first-hand experience with the Navy community shaped her perspective on the shifting dynamic of traditional gender roles. Her brothers were able to offer their expertise in naval language and as well as support financially support her writing lifestyle. Both men attended the Royal Navy Academy in Portsmouth though most recruits – about 97% – went straight to ships and learned skills at sea. Interested in cultivating social skills as well as practical skills in the case of officers acting as representatives of the country when abroad, the Academy's curriculum focused on rigorous academics, fencing, French and dancing lessons as well as officer training. Austen maintained regular correspondence with both brothers and developed a strong sense of patriotism and pride for their service. Although Austen claims in a letter that she was most comfortable creating the "pictures of domestic Life in Country Villages," her nephew James, observes she also "felt herself at home" with "sailors and ships" and wrote about the Navy with "readiness and accuracy" ("Jane Austen and the Navy," 34). This first hand experience gave Austen critical insight into the restructuring of her society as the Naval officers advanced their standings and mingled with the landed gentry. As Jocelyn Harris observes, Austen was alert to the "new kind of Englishness" ("A

Revolution Almost Beyond Expression," 91) that was forming in reaction to the Navy's cultural, economical and social influence.

Austen sets *Persuasion* in the far-reaching shadow of the Navy, even more so than in *Mansfield Park*, which was partially set in Portsmouth. In Anne Elliot's world, the Navy demolishes her previous conceptions of the structure of her society and her own identity. Sir Walter expresses disgust for the Navy's influence on the decreasing exclusivity of his social class, explaining that it is a "means of bringing persons of obscure birth into undue distinction, and raising men to honours which their fathers and grandfathers never dreamt of'" ("Persuasion," 19). This growing tension among the between the traditional social circles and its new members – those originally of lower classes – is further highlighted when Anne and her companions visit Captain Harville in Lyme. The dull social landscape is drastically altered by the introduction of the officers and wives, only recently home from sea. Their arrival infuses liveliness into the sitting room drama atmosphere. Here, Anne observes the extent of the "bewitching charm in a degree of hospitality to uncommon, so unlike the usual style of give-and-take invitations, dinners of formality and display" ("Persuasion," 98). Anne's realization of the marked difference between her current social world, one of strict and rigid gender roles, and the naval social world, one of fluidity and a more progressive treatment of the sexes, saddens her. She is struck with a sudden thought that "these would have been my friends" ("Persuasion," 98) and mourns the loss of world she could have belonged to. This grief emphasizes Anne's disappointment with the stagnation of her own life and the limitations of the role she occupies not only in her own society but within her family as well.

Anne's acceptance that her social views are evolving to embrace the Navy's influence is cemented when she visits the Crofts at Kellynch-Hall. Despite Lady Russell's insistence that the visit will be a trial, Anne instead feels that they are truly lucky in the quality of tenants they have found and is struck by the realization that she sincerely believed "Kellynch-Hall had passed into better hands than its owners"

("Persuasion," 125). Admiral Croft has removed Sir Walter's excessive amount of mirrors, stripping the house of its symbolic concern with appearances. Anne's acceptance of this transfer of social order highlights her growing rejection of the society that she has struggled to identify with for much of her life.

In this examination, Austen develops an even deeper insight into the ability of women to further their position, power and freedom through marriage. The sea offered a freedom that women were not exposed to in their confined social roles on land. Occasionally, wives of officers were allowed to accompany their husbands at sea and on board ships, despite usually going unrecorded in ships' logs or unapproved by senior officers.[1] Women and children even could accompany their husbands to sea. The sea offered an early historical opportunity for example for women finding physical freedom from the demands of traditionally expected gender roles. Mrs. Croft, Wentworth's sister, responds to Captain Wentworth's assertion that women could not possibly be comfortable on board a ship, "'But I hate to hear you talking so, like a fine gentleman, and as if women were all fine ladies, instead of rational creatures. We none of us expect to be in smooth sailing all our days'" ("Persuasion," 69). Mrs. Croft continues to extensively list the far-away places she's been able to visit on her husband's ships which includes crossing the Atlantic four times, going to the East Indies and other European ports such as Cork, Lisbon and Gibraltar ("Persuasion," 70). Mrs. Croft's traveling not only represents a break with traditional gender roles of women remaining in the home but also a new global fluidity as trade and colonialism was on the rise. Navy wives who were able to accompany their husbands at sea and become familiar with an active and adventurous lifestyle broke with the traditional social constructs and perceptions that restricted women to the home and their roles as simply daughters, wives and mothers.

Austen wields the presence of the Navy and the sea in *Persuasion* as influencers in Anne's evolving sense of self as both her emotional and physical health improve. Mrs. Croft is an example of a woman who

[1] Exact figures for number of wives on board Naval ships are difficult to determine, as they were not included in ship logs.

has gained freedom through her time with her husband at sea and has escaped some of the rigidity of the traditional gender roles that exist in on land. Mrs. Croft insists that the "happiest part of [her] life has been spent on board a ship," and the only time she experienced physical and mental distress was when Admiral Croft was at sea and she was on land, living in "perpetual fright" and suffering from "all manner of imaginary complaints from not knowing what to do with myself" ("Persuasion," 71). This is a stark emotional contrast to Mary Elliot, who suffers persistently from invented illnesses that stem from her unhappiness with her role as mother and wife, and to Anne, who is severely depressed from a lack of autonomy.

Sir Walter vanity causes him to express disgust over the sea's affect on a man's physical appearance. When he hears that Admiral Croft wants to be his tenant, Sir Walter initially opposes his application due to the fear Admiral Croft won't fit the traditional look of a gentleman. Mrs. Clay also proclaims "sea is no beautifier" ("Persuasion," 20) and that it greatly ages a person from the harshness of the elements. While Mrs. Clay goes on to clarify that "toil and labour in the mind" ("Persuasion," 20) impacts a man's physical appearance and health, her observations directly contrast with the sea's effect on Anne's physical beauty later on in the novel.

Anne's physical transformation echoes Austen's personal experience with seaside resorts, which were popularized in British culture beginning in the 1730s as a result of the "medical view of the sea as therapeutic [and] a source of good health" ("Jane Austen Beside the Sea," 168). Austen utilizes the sea as a therapeutic force for not only Anne's physical health but her emotional health as well. Within a short time of visiting Lyme, Anne's complexion and "bloom and freshness of youth [are] restored by the fine wind" ("Persuasion," 104), and she earns the admiration of Mr. Elliot as they pass on the steps leading from the beach in Lyme. Anne's renewed youth captures Wentworth's fascination, as she catches his brief "glance of brightness" which conveys he recognizes "something like Anne Elliot again" ("Persuasion," 104) in that

moment. The sea acts as a baptismal force for Anne; she is reborn. Echoing the myth of Aphrodite born from sea foam, Anne, previously described as "faded and thin" ("Persuasion," 5), now blossoms in the salt air. Anne's regaining of beauty and self-assurance is tied to the ocean's presence. Austen's use of the sea as a healing force highlights the connection between Anne's evolving sense of self and the ocean's power to transform.

Austen's theme of the ocean influencing both physical and emotional state of being is echoed in Mrs. Croft as well. Not only does Mrs. Croft's outspoken nature and self-assurance contrast sharply against Anne's own self-doubt and timid nature, but also Anne associates these personality traits with Mrs. Croft's relationship to the sea. Austen ties Mrs. Croft's self-assurance and outspoken nature – a sharp contrast to Anne's own self-doubt and timid nature – to her time spent with her husband on board a Navy ship by emphasizing that "weather-beaten complexion," is the "consequence of [Mrs. Croft] having been almost as much at sea as her husband" ("Persuasion," 48). Austen even goes as far to give Mrs. Croft the first name "Sophia," which means "wisdom" and reflects her astute insights and analysis of people and situations.

The sea gives Anne confidence and self-assurance, characteristics she greatly admires in Admiral Croft's wife. When Louisa falls from the Cobb in Lyme, it is Anne who calmly takes charge of the frantic scene and wields her authority deftly and surely. As Mary repeatedly wails "she is dead!," Wentworth looks on Louisa with a "face as pallid as her own, in an agony of silence," ("Persuasion," 107) and Henrietta faints. Wentworth is effectively useless, crying out in despair, "as if all his own strength were gone," and Anne swiftly moves in action, directing the others to revive Louisa and fetch help. Wentworth "exclaimed in bitterest agony, 'Oh God! Her father and mother!'" (Austen, 108) and Anne answers him with practicality and authority that a surgeon would make a better figure to call for. She also suggests that Benwick should retrieve the doctor since Wentworth would not know where to go. In the midst of turmoil and emotional upheaval, Anne's ability to stand steady and take command is fully recognized. Shedding

the constraints of existing as "only Anne," she demonstrates her skills in reckoning with danger and crisis while the Naval officers, men who have led and survived battles, flail around her.

While Anne is submissive in her everyday life, she thrives in crisis situations as she takes charge of the situation. She first exhibits this leadership when Mary's eldest son dislocates his shoulder after a fall. Anne commands the "afternoon of distress" and delegates who is to be informed of the accident, summons the apothecary, attends to the distraught younger sibling and organizes the care for the boy. In short, Anne is surrounded by "frightened, enquiring companions" instead of "useful assistants" ("Persuasion," 53). In both high-pressure situations, Anne rises to the challenge and calmly directs those around her, echoing an officer leading troops to battle. This shift from passivity to action illustrates that Anne possesses an ability to engage authoritatively with her surroundings, a characteristic that has been muted by her present circumstances. Her demonstrations of control contrast sharply with her pattern of quiet obedience and reveal the evolving nature of her identity into a woman more confident in making her own life decisions.

Previously, before the re-introduction of Captain Wentworth into her life, Anne existed in an unfulfilling emotional and social climate. Her interactions with Mrs. Croft and other Navy-related characters increase her awareness that the sea emphasizes values and characteristics which women are discouraged from exhibiting on land. The polarity between gender roles leads not only to the physical confinement of women to land but also their mental imprisonment. During a party at White Hart, when discussing Captain Benwick's engagement to Louisa despite his fiancé's recent death, Captain Harville and Anne argue over which gender maintains their emotional connections over a longer period of time in hopeless situations, such as death or lost chances. Asserting that there is a "true analogy between our bodily frames and our mental ones" ("Persuasion," 233), Captain Harville suggests men's superior physical strength is mirrored their feelings as well. Anne replies that since men's lives are already filled with excitement and danger, it would be too overwhelming "if woman's feelings were to be added to all this"

("Persuasion," 233) and as such, sustain stronger emotional attachments than men. Austen's critique of the "linkage between gendered minds to gendered bodies" ("A Revolution Almost Beyond Expression," 26) is a direct response to critics of her time who argued that women were victim of not only softer or weaker bodies but minds, as well.[2]

As the debate progresses, Anne dismisses the idea that a woman's memory of a beloved fades with time:

> "We certainly do no forget you, so soon as you forget us. It is, perhaps, our fate rather than our merit. We cannot help ourselves. We live at home, quiet, confined and our feelings prey upon us. You are forced on exertion. You have always a profession, pursuits, business of some sort or other, to take you back into the world immediately, and continual occupation and change soon weaken impressions" ("Persuasion," 233).

Throughout *Persuasion,* there runs an undercurrent of tension between the men and women as discussions revolve around not the monetary value of work outside the home but the intrinsic value of occupying one's facilities in engaging outlets, often to distract from internal turmoil. The effects of a lack of stimulation are highlighted by Anne's severe depression and listlessness at the beginning of the novel. She has spent years focusing on the regret of yielding to Lady Russell's directions and breaking her engagement with Wentworth. Despite her efforts to manage her father's books and other chores, she has no successful channel through which to focus her thoughts and process her emotions. Austen emphasizes the imprisonment that women face in society as individuals lacking autonomy and fulfillment of intrinsic desires, which can harm their psychological and emotional health. Though veiled in Anne Elliot's fictional

[2] In February 1815 in the *The Edinburgh Review*, William Hazlitt criticized female author Frances Burney's writing due to the "less power of continued voluntary attention, reason – passion and imagination" ("A Revolution Almost Beyond Expression, 26) connected with her gender and therefore weaker physical strength than male counterparts.

experiences, Austen's subtly calls attention to the land-locked state that women occupy in their current gender roles.

Ultimately, Anne marries Wentworth and "gloried in being a sailor's wife" ("Persuasion," 252) though Austen lightly glosses over the implied danger that accompanies a life at sea. The role that the Navy and sea play in *Persuasion* as a medium to explore gender roles effect on the female identity possesses "enormous revolutionary potential" for Austen's time and "bring mobility to a static society and emotional release to a suppressed heroine...offer[ing] the dispossessed heroine citizenship in a fresh community full of vitality and promise" ("Romantic Imprisonment," 45). Utilizing the ocean and the Navy, Austen closely examines how society imprisoned women in inflexible gender roles until they were, quite literally, able to leave them behind to join their husbands at sea. *Persuasion*'s subtle social commentary is all the more poignant in that it comes from a female author. Previously, the literary world's main contributors were male. Women were often excluded from the very society they were supposed to be harmonious with. Austen's awareness of this exclusion, as shown through Anne's fictional experiences and observations, strengthens *Persuasion's* power in terms of laying the foundation for future analysis of the female identity in literature.

Captain Harville and Anne discuss the exclusion of the female voice from history and art when the Captain remarks that history is against women and that he does not think he "has ever opened a book in [his] life which had not something to say upon woman's inconstancy" ("Persuasion," 234). Captain Harville's acknowledgment of the gendered voice existing in literature prompts Anne to respond:

> "...If you please, no reference to examples in books in books. Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands" ("Persuasion," 234).

Anne's observation that there is a severe lack of the female perspective in literature of the time echoes the impact of Austen's writing as a medium for examining women's role in society. Austen's analysis of female identity in the context of current social boundaries makes *Persuasion* a cornerstone fictional text in witnessing the literary evolution of the feminist heroine. Anne Elliot is a heroine who embraces the ocean as a medium as she analyzes her evolving identity and grapples with, and eventually triumphs over, the devastating internal trauma that occurs from prescriptively following society's oppressive and constricting guidelines for her gender.

What Happens When You Sleep with Open Windows

i am caged by bones
my sweat curling in skin grooves
as i rock through each night
creaky eyes, smudged dreams
that make me scream

it all turns to ashes.

that one morning
i crashed to earth
so hard it shook the wallpaper free –
i had to learn to breathe
around smothering silence –
is it freedom if only i can feel it?

she beckoned me further,
to shake off my own flesh,
i was invited by a sea salt scratch –

mermaids sigh sway sing
under algae ceilings
flick tails through sand
flirt with dolphins & wear shark tooth crowns
dance until the starfish fade.

it's rude to bring shoes to a mermaid ball.

Remember to kiss both scaly cheeks –
dodge poisonous breath that slips into men's mouths
like daydream wisps.

go deeper

lose the light

swallow the current whole.

Chapter II: Domestication of Insanity in Victorian Woman

"Tame by habit. Disciplined by destiny."

– Lucy Snowe, *Villette*

In the Victorian Era, the most significant evolution in the treatment of women's mental health was the domestication of insanity, which Andrew Scull explains as society's "efforts to tame the wildly asocial and attempts to transform the company of the deranged into at least a facismile of bourgeois family life" ("Madhouses, Mad-Doctors, and Madmen," l, 233). This transition in the medical treatment of madness reflected patriarchal structure of Victorian morality, which encouraged repression of female sexuality and strengthened rigid gender roles. Daughters, mothers and wives traditionally deferred to male authority figures and exercised little control in the decision-making processes that affected and ultimately guided their lives. During this time, the treatment and care for women's psychosocial health increasingly became directed by the male authority figures. This process of "taming the British lunatic" reshaped the idea of madness into one that was congruent with the everyday lifestyle of the middle class.

In order to concretely define a concept as abstract as madness, Victorian medical professionals created a three-pillar cornerstone: moral insanity, moral management and moral architecture. Each pillar deconstructed women's autonomy by limiting their own role in their mental health. While women were regarded by society as the core essence of a home, they were typically excluded and isolated from decisions about their mental state. These new pillars attempted to transform male authority into a benevolent presence whose actions were driven by a moral responsibility to heal the broken female psyche.

Moral insanity, according to Elaine Showalter, "redefined madness, not as a loss of reason, but as a deviance from socially accepted behavior" ("The Female Malady," 29). Introduced by James Cowles Prichard in 1835, this definition simplified the nuances and complexities of mental health issues to encompass any behavior that was deemed abnormal by society's standards. Changes in anything from attitudes, behaviors, energy, and mood could not be diagnosed as symptoms of madness. Prichard's definition also specifically allowed for a patient's mental facilities to remain unaltered as long as there was a "'morbid perversion of the natural feelings, affections, inclinations, temper, habits, moral dispositions, and natural impulses'" ("The Female Malady," 29). Moral insanity's definition was significant in that it allowed psychiatrists to exercise a broad interpretation of madness which now included female patients who still retained reasoning skills and intellectual awareness but whose family or peers believed she was behaving irregularly. The concept of moral insanity exponentially widened the chasm between female biological processes and their true effects and symptoms. As there were no male parallels, female biological processes like puberty, the menstrual cycle, menopause, and childbearing were blamed by the male-dominated medical community for the rising number of female institution patients.

Influenced by the rising movement to domesticate insanity, moral management shifted from physical restraints and harsh treatments to a more paternal and close-supervision approach. Beginning in the late 18th century and gaining wide traction in the first half of the 19th century, moral management supporters believed that focusing efforts on rewarding a patient's good behavior or progress was more successful in "re-educat[ing] the insane in habits of industry, self-control, moderation and perseverance" ("The Female Malady," 29) than previously used methods of violence. Instead of simply controlling the abnormal behavior of lunatic women

through punishment, the British psychiatric community sought to fully cure insanity and integrate patients into their previous social roles. Under this new directive, women were confined in their own homes, oftentimes ordered to bed rest without any contact with the outside world. This physical confinement often deepened the emotional and psychological issues instead of alleviating them as women were left idle and restless. While some moral managers did in fact "recognize that the intellectual and vocational limitations of the female role, especially in the middle classes, were as maddening as its biological characteristics," they interpreted this as evidence that women's limitations in only learning skills suitable to society's acceptance contributed to their significantly weaker constitution which "needed to fend off moral insanity" than their male counterparts ("The Female Malady," 59-60).

The third pillar of Victorian psychiatric theory – moral architecture – addressed the new structure of mental asylums to be more "therapeutic environments" that were "influenced by benevolent forces" ("The Female Malady," 46). Influenced by the simultaneous passage of the Lunacy Act and the County Asylums Act in 1845, asylums were now held to higher standards of care such as being properly registered with the Lunacy Commission, employing a resident physician, promoting inmates to the title of "patients." These changes in regulations were intended to create more humane and peaceful environments so patients could receive better care yet actually stripped patients of their autonomy by blocking their access to court if they sought to challenge their detainment. John Thurnam, a medical superintendent of the York Retreat[3], found in an 1845 study that male asylum patients outnumbered female patients by about 30% ("The

[3] The York Retreat, founded in 1792 by William Tuke and the Society of Friends and opened in 1792, sought to provide humane care to asylum patients. The York Retreat led the Victorian psychiatric community in the shift from using harsh restraints and chains to more mild restraints like the straight jacket. Inspired by the Quaker principles of self-control, compassion and respect, the York Retreat was instrumental in shaping mental health reforms in the 19th century.

Female Malady," 52). As Scull explains, writers of insanity assumed there was a higher instance of female asylum patients when in fact, records in both England and America showed "with relative consistency, a significant excess of males" ("Madhouses, Mad-Doctors and Madmen," 22). By 1872, 31, 822 of the 58, 640 certified lunatics in England and Wales were women. By the 1890s, men were still the majority of the patients in middle- and upper-class institutions but "the predominance of women had spread to include all classes of patients and all types of institutions; female paupers and female private patients were in the majority in licensed houses, registered hospitals and the country asylums" ("Madhouses, Mad-Doctors and Madmen," 52). While men were a significant demographic in the patient make-up of Victorian asylums, social and cultural pressures regarding gender in the 1800's influenced the rise of female patients in a trend that excluded their male counterparts.

There were several reasons for the rising number of female lunatics. As the number of women patients increased, the number of women madhouse proprietors decreased. In the 18th century and up until the 1840s, female licensed proprietors often managed private madhouses that served predominantly female patients. However, the rise of moral management influenced medical profession claims that only doctors possessed the qualifications to care for the insane and as such, women were gradually "forced into marginal, secondary, or volunteer roles, much as the rising profession of obstetrics demoted midwifery" ("The Female Malady," 53). The argument that insanity required the medical treatment of a doctor and thus rendered women incapable of caring for lunatics led the Commission in Lunacy to decide in 1859 that they would consider granting new licenses for private asylums only to medical men. Though this report announced it discouraged women applicants for licenses, they were not always refused. This

sharp decrease in women on the managerial side of insanity care significantly contributed to the rising numbers of female patients.

By the mid-19th century, women were overwhelmingly the patients in mental asylums. In St. Luke's Hospital in London, out of the 18, 759 patients received in its 50 years of operation, 11,162 were women ("The Female Malady," 51). In the eyes of the male-dominated medical community, the skewed gender numbers confirmed the belief that women were indeed "more vulnerable to insanity than men because the instability of their reproductive systems interfered with their sexual, emotional and rational control" ("The Female Malady," 55). The increasing bias against women's mental health prominently contributed to the growing numbers of women committed to asylums while also suppressing women in their own homes, as they were held at fault for their own biological processes. The biological processes that were celebrated as the very essence of Victorian women's femininity, such as puberty and childbearing, were also what men blamed as the sources of madness and insanity; paradoxically women's strengths were also seen as their weaknesses.

The idea of "'the sympathetic connection existing between the brain and uterus'" ("The Female Malady," 56) was a commonly agreed on notion and fueled speculations that puberty was the beginning of a woman's vulnerability to insanity. Puberty and menstruation marked a significant transition time not only physically but psychologically as well. This time signaled a stark division between Victorian girls' sexless childhoods when they experienced much of the same freedoms as boys and the beginning of womanhood with its confining social rules. At the age of puberty, many girls' formal educations were tempered or ended altogether as they became increasingly tethered to home life as they were groomed to marry and embrace motherhood. While boys' puberty signaled their entrance to manhood, which gave them "'the knowledge of

greater power'" ("The Female Malady," 57), girls experienced a harshly different shift as they lost mobility and gained an increased sense of dependence. According to Dr. Edward Tilt, female puberty could be classified as a case of "miniature insanity" as many girls underwent severe mood changes and emotional turmoil, symptoms understood today stemming from the hormonal changes occurring during female puberty. However, this is not to undervalue the very real trauma associated with this period in a Victorian woman's life as "case histories of mental breakdown attributed to the biological stresses of puberty suggest both gender conflict and protest against sexual repression" ("The Female Malady," 57).

The Victorian psychiatric community also saw a link between women who had recently given birth and psychological health issues. This phenomenon was coined "Puerperal Insanity" but could be used to describe both manic and depressive states and explained that at post-childbirth, a "woman's mind was abnormally weak, her constitution depleted, and her control over her behavior diminished" ("The Woman and the Demon," 56). Women could exhibit symptoms in a variety of ways such as exhaustion, depression, anxiety or a lack of interest in their infant, which led medical professions to often prescribe bed rest with little to no stimulation which violated much of Victorian society's valued ideals of the female identity. While we now know that the medical term for this umbrella of symptoms is postpartum depression[4], medical officials in the Victorian era could only link it to the female gender and not the male, therefore assuming it confirmed their theory that women were more susceptible to psychological

[4] According to the National Institute of Mental Health, the definition of postpartum depression is "a mood disorder that can affect women after childbirth. Mothers with postpartum depression experience feelings of extreme sadness, anxiety, and exhaustion that may make it difficult for them to complete daily care activities for themselves or for others."

weaknesses. Consistently, society ignored the social and historical context of such situations and found, again and again, the fault lay in the female nature.

In “The Yellow Wallpaper,” Charlotte Gilman’s unnamed female protagonist is the victim of such misdiagnosis and moral management. Her husband, who is a physician, disputes her claims of illness after the recent birth of her child. The woman is disheartened by her husband’s lack of belief but accepts the social truth that “if a physician of high standing, and one's own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency—what is one to do?” (“The Yellow Wallpaper,”1). This assessment represents the complete and utter control that a husband possessed not only over his wife’s care, but his wife’s narrative. This is a particularly interesting example in that the woman’s husband is also her doctor meaning that he is able to administer authority in all aspects of her life. In order to cure his wife’s affliction, John locks her in a bedroom in their summer estate without any stimulation or activities. She is told to rest and though she disagrees and personally believes that “congenial work, with excitement and change” would help in the healing process, the protagonist once again admits “but what is one to do?” (“The Yellow Wallpaper,”1). She is completely at the mercy of her own internal reflections, which are increasingly affected by her extended period of isolation.

Despite her husband’s stern insistence that she in fact recovering, the protagonist still feels depressed and cries when she’s alone, which is often the case. While at first she attempts to write in secret, she soon finds it too exhausting to continue since she must hide her writing from John. With no distractions or much interaction with her husband and his sister, the protagonist is a prisoner in her own room and focuses all her attention on minute details such as the furniture, the way the moonlight comes through the window and the pattern on the wallpaper.

This fixation on the wallpaper consumes her energies and she "determines for the thousandth time that I WILL follow that pointless pattern to some sort of a conclusion" as she traces its thread on the wall" ("The Yellow Wallpaper," 4). The paper becomes an oppressive and mysterious force that she feels is actively speaking to her. Attempting to understand the pattern and its effect on her becomes the protagonist's sole source of comfort. She keeps her obsession from her husband and lies awake each night, focusing on the pattern. It's not until she sees the shape of a woman in the paper that her psychological health begins to truly unravel. Our protagonist's conclusion that there is a woman "behind the paper," coincides with her husband's increasingly strict guidelines of her health. He forces her to lie down more, further limiting her mobility as her anxiety and paranoia spike in response to her feelings of being trapped. Like the woman in the wallpaper, the protagonist is "subdued, quiet" in the daylight hours, calmed by the stillness she perceives from the wallpaper. Yet, during the night and in the shadow, the protagonist feels as if the woman in the paper is shaking the pattern, attempting to escape the pattern, although the protagonist concludes that "nobody could climb through that pattern—it strangles so" ("The Yellow Wallpaper," 8). The extreme lack of stimulation has resulted in the protagonist diverting her energy into details of the wallpaper and the woman she perceives in the pattern is a direct reflection of her own unraveling psychological state. "The Yellow Wallpaper" culminates with the protagonist's psyche splintering and she "creeps" around the room like the woman from the wallpaper as she hallucinates and her emotional stability is compromised. Gilman's story highlights the traumatic effects that moral management had on women who were isolated and imprisoned for various emotional and mental reasons. The readers witness the destruction of a woman's identity when it becomes dominated and consequentially smothered by male authority.

Significantly, the story of the Victorian madwoman is a male-centered one. There were no female medical officers, women lacked access to medical journals and most female asylum patients were denied activities such as writing and therefore had almost no outlets to convey their stories. Florence Nightingale, the founder of modern nursing and a social activist who championed better quality medical care and patient rights, was the rare exception to the male-only medical field. Born into a wealthy Italian family, Nightingale defied her parents' wishes and enrolled in nursing school in 1850 at Institution of Protestant Deaconesses in Kaiserswerth, Germany. Her manuscript, *Cassandra* harshly criticized the institution of the Victorian family. Though unpublished during her life and later undergoing many rounds of revision, the essence of Nightingale's writing was grounded in her own frustration with her family's attempts to prevent her from becoming a nurse. *Cassandra* is a bitter reflection of the circumstances surrounding middle-class Victorian women and their experience of suffering from psychological trauma. Nightingale argues "the suffocation of family life, boredom, and patriarchal protectivism gradually destroys a woman's capacity to dream, to work, or to act." Confined to their internal worlds, women became more vulnerable to breakdowns and depression. Due to their lack of external stimulation, combined with the strict roles they played in their relationships as daughters, wives and daughters, women often withdrew into sickness as a respite. Nightingale theorized that "depression, illness, withdrawal and complaint were feminine forms of protest far less effective than rebellion and action and so in order for women to be saved, they must first be awakened from their infantile unconsciousness." Passivity, according the Nightingale, eventually bred "exhaustion, enervation, and illness." The confinement that women faced in their public and private spheres prompted an examination of the limitations of a female identity rooted in indifference.

Nightingale's most impassioned request on behalf of women draws inspiration from the ocean, pleading the case that women reclaim the ability to suffer for "out of nothing comes nothing. But out of suffering may come the cure" to madness. Nightingale writes that "a hundred may struggle and drown in the breakers" in the search for a "new world" and "rather, ten times rather, die in the surf heralding the way to that new world than stand idly on the shore." Nightingale's use of sea imagery highlights the necessity for woman to reject the denial and suppression of their emotions and sexuality by the Victorian patriarchy. The idea of seeking freedom from the restrictive gender roles motivated Nightingale, shortly after writing *Cassandra*, to leave home and oversee an institution for gentlewoman. The passionate arguments Nightingale employs in *Cassandra* echoed woman authors' attempts to clarify and resolve their own complicated feelings on the suppression of the female identity and the subsequent methods to liberate it.

In Charlotte Bronte's *Villette,* ocean imagery is utilized to examine Lucy Snowe's evolving understanding of her own identity as she struggles with society's repressive nature. After quitting Britton, Lucy spends the next eight years as a sailing vessel in a "harbour still as glass – the streersman stretched on the little deck, his face up to heaven, his eyes closed: buried, if you will, in a long prayer" ("Villette," 42). Lucy reflects that passivity is the normal state for many women and girls of her time and seeks no different way of life. Bronte's criticism of society's expected complacency from women of certain social classes emphasizes the idea that women were underused and under-stimulated in their lives. Lucy experiences a deep depression and anxiety during these times, furthering the ship analogy by concluding that she must have fallen over-board or that there was a wreck as she remembers a lengthy time of "of cold, of danger, of contention." She continues to detail the psychological scar of this time in a nightmare

form when she feels the "rush and saltness of briny waves in my throat, and their icy pressure on my lungs" ("Villette," 43). The ocean's tumultuous nature represents Lucy's internal turmoil as she struggles to find a sense of self and purpose in a society that is designed to suppress women's sexuality and passions.

Kate Chopin also uses the ocean to highlight the struggle between the repression women felt in society and their desire for liberation. In *The Awakening,* Edna Pontellier spends a summer in Grand Isle in the Gulf of Mexico with her family. The female dominated environment of Mdm. Lebrun's resort coupled with Edna's growing connection with Robert Lebrun serve as catalysts to her examination of her identity. Overwhelmed with the feeling of "an indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish" ("The Awakening," 8), Edna begins to question the role she occupies not only in her own family life but the essence of her own self.

Edna's increasing despair and restlessness as a result of her role in society culminates in her ultimate freedom: death. Drowning herself in the ocean is both symbolic and mythological; a return to the one place she has felt completely at peace with herself. As she swims out, Edna relishes in her autonomy, observing that her husband and children "were a part of her life" but should not think "they could possess her, body and soul" ("The Awakening," 109). Throughout the novel, Edna's attempts to redefine herself as a person with complex needs and wants outside her gender role are met with hostility and confusion from her family and peers. Edna's rejection of the roles that defined her – mother and wife – in her last moments signifies her liberation. She belongs not to others but to herself and her death is an extension of her desire to escape the limitations of her gender and the life she feels was chosen for her instead of choosing for herself.

These women authors highlight the psychological health concerns of the era as women's care options were deliberated by the male authority figures in their life. The suppression of women's desires, both physically and emotionally, highlights the growing tension between genders as some women began to challenge a patriarchal structure and seek more autonomy over their own lives. The sea was used in some fiction to clarify female characters' growing awareness that a woman's life could evolve into a new pattern that shook some of the rigidity of the traditional Victorian woman roles.

The Edge of the World is Her Tightrope

I.

A girl walks the shore, muted soft in the morning haze.

She had always believed in simple things like temptation and absolution and protecting your hopes in cupped hands, but now, she is not so sure.

So she carves a path, balances on the water's curl, for the edge of the world is her tightrope and her walk winds and twists towards nowhere.

II.

The sun settles heavy in the sky as she continues forward; pressing and releasing her weight on tightrope toes further along the path she instinctually follows,

A disillusioned sleeping beauty who rubbed rose-colored dreams out of her eyes upon waking after discovering that princes are fickle and she can save herself.

She wants nothing more than to sink into warm water and drift in the endless *in, out, in, out* of the tide.

III.

They say salt water cures everything so she shook off the night's velvet fog and climbed down her ivy-choked tower.

If Atlas were to tilt his burden, the dizzying mess of constellations that stains the midnight sky would spill right into the ocean and she would slip, tumble, fall after them.

A girl wanders along her tightrope at the edge of the world – pulled by the moon, the sea, and the night's coaxing – steady and sure and free.

Chapter III: Virginia Woolf Embraces the Waves

"I ride rough waters, and shall sink with no one to save me.**"**

– Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*

Virginia Woolf's fascination with female identity was heavily influenced by society's oppression of her gender and the educational, financial and emotional restrictions imposed on women. As discussed in earlier sections, the Victorian Era experienced significant changes in society's perception of women's mental health causes and treatments. Woolf, who suffered oftentimes from debilitating mental health issues that in present day would most likely be diagnosed as depression and anxiety, felt these consequences first-hand. Like Charlotte Gilman's character in "The Yellow Wallpaper" experienced, medical professionals often forbade Woolf from reading or writing, which only served to worsen Woolf's mental state. Even from a young age, Woolf was frustrated by the differences between female and male roles in society. Though her father granted her full access to his library – a rare concession from a Victorian patriarch – she never received a formal education. Woolf's acute awareness of the power inequality between the sexes influenced her continued refusal of marriage proposals, as she feared losing her limited autonomy.

In her writing, Woolf examines the strict and emotional social confines of the female identity. Influenced by Freudian thought, Woolf demonstrates, both in her personal and public writing, a keen interest in the relationship between the subconscious and conscious. Using themes, symbolism, and imagery related to the ocean, Woolf explores the tension between a woman's subconscious desires and conscious actions and its effect on shaping the female identity.

In *The Voyage Out*, Rachel Vinrace's transition from girlhood to womanhood is highlighted by her evolving desires and self-awareness. Her most poignant sexual and emotional moments of realization are highlighted by Woolf's use of ocean imagery and symbolism. Prior to Helen and Ridley Ambrose joining the ship, Rachel's life is sheltered and confined to a narrow social setting. She has no previous experience with the opposite sex despite her age, and seeing Mr. Ambrose kiss Helen on the cheek forces her turn away to look "at the depth of the sea" ("The Voyage Out," 20). The "slightly disturbed" surface of the sea due to the ship's path represents the effect of seeing this exchange on Rachel's psychological state. She notes that beneath the surface it was "green and dim, and it only grew dimmer and dimmer until the sand at the bottom was only a pale blue" ("The Voyage Out," 20). Woolf's description creates an intimate connection between Rachel's consciousness and the ocean. Rachel's interactions and experiences on board the *Euphrosyne*[5] create ripples on the surface of her subconscious and force her to deeply examine her own desires as well as challenge her previously held convictions about her identity.

Rachel's exploration of identity centers profoundly on her sexuality and interactions with men. Rachel's voyage from the "imprisoned" island of England to the unknown and more romantic, fertile lands of Africa is representative of her evolution into a sexually aware young woman. As the *Euphrosyne* sails farther into the open waters, Woolf describes the ship not only as a physical vessel for travel but as a vessel to facilitate Rachel's own transformation:

> But, on the other hand, an immense dignity had descended upon her; she was an inhabitant of the great world, which has so few inhabitants, traveling all day across an

[5] Euphrosyne, daughter of Titan Oceanus, was an oceanid, or sea nymph. She was one of the Three Graces and personified beauty and grace.

> empty universe, with veils drawn before her and behind. She was more lonely than the caravan crossing the desert; she was infinitely more mysterious, moving by her own power and sustained by her own resources. The sea might give her death or some unexampled joy, and none would ever know of it. She was a bride going forth to her husband, a virgin unknown of men; in her vigour and purity she might be likened to all beautiful things, for as a ship she had a life of her own ("The Voyage Out," 24-5).

The evocative image of the ship as an isolated and untouched vessel traveling into the unknown world is a direct representation of Rachel embarking on a journey of self-discovery. Woolf's virgin bride metaphor reflects Rachel's purity but also reveals the deeper connection between sexuality and identity by identifying the ship "had a life of her own." By highlighting the relationship between the ship's physical journey and Rachel's psychological journey, Woolf emphasizes a woman's evolving autonomy over her sexual and emotional identity as she begins "moving by her own power."

Woolf emphasizes that transformation of a woman's sense of self occurs when she begins to deeply analyze her emotions and the reasons behind these emotions. Rachel's first sexual experience profoundly impacts her both physically and psychologically. Mr. Dalloway's kiss sends "black waves across her eyes" ("The Voyage Out," 66) and Rachel, overwhelmed with her physical and emotional reaction, escapes to the deck. As she calms down, she realizes that "life seemed to hold infinite possibilities she had never guessed at," and she looks out over "the troubled grey waters, where the sunlight was fitfully scattered upon the crests of the waves, until she was cold and absolutely calm again" ("The Voyage Out," 67). Rachel's emotional state is reflected by the ocean's turbulent surface yet also calms her anxiety as she begins to process the event that just unfolded. Woolf uses the sea as a tool for self-analysis to clarify the complexities

and depth of Rachel's evolving identity. Despite her uncertainty about the exact repercussions of the kiss, Rachel realizes "something wonderful had happened" regarding the experience ("The Voyage Out," 66-67). The kiss is the true catalyst for Rachel's sexual awakening and she begins to question the previous roles she occupied in the society she has left on shore.

Woolf uses the sea and the *Euphrosyne* to mirror Rachel's internal struggles to further her understanding of herself. After the kiss with Mr. Dalloway, Helen reveals to Rachel that that experience is only the beginning of Rachel's intimacy with the opposite sex. As the women discuss the qualities that make a person worthy of building a relationship with, Helen realizes Rachel's narrow scope of social interactions and the implications is has on the development of her identity. At the conclusion of the conversation, Rachel has the sudden vision of her "own personality, of herself as a real everlasting thing, different from anything else, unmergable, like the sea" ("The Voyage Out," 75). Rachel's vision of solidifying her personality into a defined and permanent form such as the sea further links her identity to the ocean as a whole. By explicitly connecting Rachel's emerging self-awareness to the sea, Woolf allows the reader a deeper and more full sense of Rachel's subconscious and her conscious desires and emotions. It's important as well that Rachel's process of self-discovery begins while at sea. It is not until she has spent time physically free of the strict rigidity of her social world back on shore that she begins to examine her identity.

Rachel's courtship and following engagement with Terence further deepen her fascination with her sexuality and, in turn, intimacy with the opposite sex. As Rachel writes to relatives about her impending nuptials, Terence speculates aloud about the frustrations of married life that stem from the gulf of differences between the male and female spheres. Prompted by Rachel to envision their own married future, Terence attempts to communicate his

tumultuous feelings about her and admits one reason he is drawn to her is because "there are moments…when, if we stood on a rock together, you'd would throw me into the sea" ("The Voyage Out," 281). Rachel, surprised by this image, ponders its implications and reacts passionately:

> To be flung into the sea, to be washed hither and thither, and driven about the roots of the world – the idea was incoherently delightful. She sprang up, and began moving about the room, bending and thrusting aside the chairs and tables as if she were indeed striking through the waters ("The Voyage Out," 281).

Rachel's demonstration of vitality pleases Terence as he feels as she seems to be "cleaving a passage for herself" ("The Voyage Out," 281) and, by extension, clearing a path for their future triumph over any obstacles they may encounter. The couple wrestles to the floor "imagining a rock, and the sea heaving beneath them" ("The Voyage Out," 282), and Rachel, caught in Terence's arms, ends the game by claiming to be a mermaid that can swim away. Rachel's display of strength and passion, fueled by imagining she could throw Terence into the sea, highlights the growth of her self-assurance. Woolf connects Rachel's sense of power to the ocean, a vast contrast to the early Rachel in the novel who was easily overwhelmed by her emotions while at sea. Now, Rachel is a commanding force and even when Terence catches her on the floor, she remains in a position of power by using the mermaid imagery as a way to escape Terrance's gendered views on marriage. Rachel's connection to the sea is demonstrated by its ability to empower her while also clarifying her emotions. This interaction demonstrates Rachel's growing recognition of her strength as she begins to recognize her control over her own sexuality.

Woolf uses ocean themes and imagery to highlight the evolution of Rachel's identity as she examines her role in society. Rachel has transformed from a naïve young women comfortable in her sheltered social world to a woman confident in what she desires and navigating a new society. Through her interactions with others and the progression of her relationship with Terence, Rachel defines her own identity more sharply and fully than it had ever been before. She recognizes that following her culture's normal gender prescription of marriage and children does not align with her identity. Upon reaching this pinnacle of self-discovery, she transcends her physical world and falls ill. As she battles a fever, Rachel drifts in and out of consciousness as "every once in a while someone turned her over at the bottom of the sea" ("The Voyage Out," 322). Rachel has not only successfully breached the surface of her subconscious but has plunged to its depths. Here, she is unreachable by those left behind in the physical world. The fever progresses and Woolf describes one of Rachel's last moments of consciousness as if "she had come to the surface of the dark, sticky pool, and a wave seemed to bear her up and with it." ("The Voyage Out," 327). As Rachel ebbs in and out of awareness, Woolf's imagery emphasizes the connection between Rachel and the ocean. Now that Rachel has reached her epiphany, she relinquishes her control over her subconscious and succumbs to its power.

Woolf utilizes Rachel Vinrace's evolution to push the boundaries of society's restrictions on women. Rachel's journey of self-discovery is ultimately realized by her death. Exploring her identity through ocean imagery and symbolism, Rachel surpasses the limits of the physical world, and to reach her full psychological and emotional potential, she can no longer exist in her society. Thus, she dies young, virginal, and unmarried and remains free from the sexual, financial and social restraints placed on women of that time.

In Woolf's *To the Lighthouse,* Mrs. Ramsay is a powerful matriarch who already possesses a developed awareness of self. As she observes her family and guests, Mrs. Ramsay is able to pull back and view the scene removed from her. In a moment of reflection, Mrs. Ramsay ponders that the qualities that one knows another might seem childish yet "beneath it is all dark, it is all spreading, it is unfathomably deep; but now and again we rise to the surface and that is what you see us by" ("To the Lighthouse," 62). Mrs. Ramsay recognizes the turmoil that a person undergoes when attempting to understand her complex desires, motivations and emotions and the subsequent presentation of self to the world around her. As a wife and mother, Mrs. Ramsay recognizes this is the core of her identity in the eyes of her society yet she is aware that the truth of her identity lies deeper in than surface examinations. Her moment of clarity on the depth of identity, specifically her own female identity, frees her from the constraints of her roles as mother and wife. As such, is able to experience a "triumph over life" ("To the Lighthouse," 63) as she finds a subconscious state of existence unburdened by society.

The Waves is another example of Woolf's thematic use of the ocean as a vehicle to explore the evolving female identity. Following six characters from childhood to adulthood, Woolf meticulously assigns characteristics to each person to represent different philosophies or aspects of society. Rhoda, Jinny and Susan all embody different aspects of Woolf's present-day feminine identity. Susan's character represents the nostalgic days of a pastoral England as she has a visceral connection with the land and yearns to be back on her family farm in the country, while Rhoda and Jinny are more representative of Woolf's idea of modern women being intimately connected to their subconscious desires and self-awareness.

Jinny's sense of self and identity is linked with her finely-tuned awareness of her body, both physically and sexually. Even in her youth, Jinny possesses a heightened awareness of

physical being. When she lies on the ground after playing a game with Susan and Rhoda, Jinny revels in the adrenaline and observes that "there is nothing staid, nothing settled in this universe" and "'all is rippling, all is dancing'" ("The Waves," 25). Jinny is aware of the potential power that her beauty and sensuality have over the opposite sex. As her vision of being singled out by an admirer fades, she feels that "'now the tide sinks...the brisk waves that slap my ribs rock more gently, and my heart rides at anchor, like a sailing-boat whose sails slide slowly down on to the white deck'" ("The Waves," 25). The omniscient quality of Jinny's vision, which is echoed later on when she attends a party, reveals a distinct moment of self-discovery, much like Rachel Vinrace's visions. Woolf links Jinny's relationship with her sexuality to the ebb and flow of tides to reflect Jinny awareness that her sexuality will be a powerful tool in navigating her social world but it also is entirely dependent on her male counterparts and will eventually diminish over time as she ages and men lose interest. By defining her role in society by relying on her sexuality and beauty, Jinny heavily roots her identity in her connection with awareness of the physical world, which is highlighted by Woolf's oceanic imagery.

Rhoda's self-awareness is centered on her emotional and psychological state. Unlike Jinny who feels connected to the natural movements of the sea, Rhoda experiences intense sensations of isolation and despair clarified by the waves. When she is playing with flower petals in a basin of water, Rhoda's imagination turns the petals into ships and the basin of water into the ocean as she manipulates her created world by dropping twigs and stones into the water. She observes that some ships will struggle or "dash themselves against the cliffs" "(The Waves," 9) but there is one ship that sails alone and that is Rhoda's ship. Rhoda connects powerfully with the image of a ship weathering storms on its own in the vast ocean. Her overwhelming insecurity

intensifies as she grows older and struggles to determine her role not only in social settings which influences her ability to clearly define her own identity on a more personal level.

Rhoda's continued sense of isolation profoundly impacts her sense of security. Yearning to be more like Jinny and Susan, who Rhoda feels have a clearly defined sense of self, she describes her journey through life as sailing on alone. Struggling to recognize her place in her world, Rhoda is overwhelmed by a party setting as she fails to connect with the scene and its guests and feels she is "to be broken all [her] life…like a cork on a rough sea" ("The Waves," 107). Rhoda's battle with powerful insecurities and an inability to connect with those around her is highlighted by the continued use of the lonely ship metaphor and the violent wave imagery. Rhoda's life-long turmoil regarding her identity culminates in her suicide on a Spanish mountain:

> We launch out now over the precipice. Beneath us lie the lights of the herring fleet. The cliffs vanish. Rippling small, rippling grey, innumerable waves spread beneath us. I touch nothing. I see nothing. We may sink and settle on the waves. The sea will drum in my ears…Rolling me over the waves will shoulder me under. Everything falls in tremendous shower, dissolving me ("The Waves," 206).

This passage illustrates the overwhelming sense of helplessness and isolation Rhoda feels throughout the novel. Woolf uses the sea as a medium to expand on Rhoda's deeply rooted insecurities and uncertainties about her role in the world. Rhoda's obsession with the lack of autonomy she feels in her life is highlighted by the repeated images of being manipulated by the ocean's waves while Jinny interprets wave imagery as powerful depiction of her independence.

Both female characters' identities are reflected by wave imagery, which highlights their strengths or their weaknesses in their processes of self-discovery.

Woolf not utilizes wave imagery to represent female characters' anxiety regarding a world in which they struggle to fully identify with. In *To the Lighthouse,* Lily Briscoe observes Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay interacting and is struck by the feeling that life, "from being made up of little separate incidents which one lived one by one, became curled and whole like a wave which bored one up with it and threw one down with it, there, with a dash on the beach" ("To the Lighthouse," 47). Lily's epiphany about the nature of time reveals her insecurities and similarly to Rhoda, a fear of powerlessness in the face of change and passage of time. Both women experience uncertainty about how to integrate into other characters' worlds as they work to fully define their own sense of self.

Woolf's use of the tides and waves to mark the passage of time and the tumultuous life changes it brings with it in *The Waves*. Each passing of time is marked by an interlude of the shore at different points in the day. In the opening interlude, when "the sun had not yet risen" ("The Waves," 3) Woolf describes the image of a woman's arm raising a lamp to illuminate the sky and compares the movement of the waves to the unconscious breathing of someone sleeping. Attributing feminine characteristics to the scenery further highlights the transforming perspectives the female characters possess of themselves and their surrounding worlds over the years. Much later in the novel, immediately after Rhoda stumbles up a Spanish hill to end her life, Woolf utilizes the interlude to explore the permanence of existence. Throughout the novel, Rhoda struggles to define herself without the context of other characters. She is plagued by the feeling of tumbling in waves and being carried by the tides of change and time while being powerless to enact her own autonomy in her life. This tension between solidity and fluidity is

depicted by the following interlude as the waves nearing the shore are "robbed of light, and fell in one long concussion, like a wall falling, a wall of grey stone, unpierced by any chink of light" ("The Waves," 117). Woolf's description of the shore scene at twilight highlights Rhoda's psychological evolution. The description of the sea at different points of the day represents the emotional and transformation the characters undergo throughout the novel.

Woolf's use of sea imagery highlights her female characters' struggles with determining their identity and what that encompasses. Using the ocean to explore the subconscious of female characters allows Woolf to experiment with the idea of journeying between the surface levels and the "sea floor" depths of self. By connecting the sea and tides to the passage of time, Woolf conveys the ability to reflect her characters evolving identities in nature, ultimately relating the female evolution of self to the evolution of time and nature itself.

Tides

She scratched prayers on hard
bellies of bleached sand
dollars, and tossed them in the Atlantic's
yawn, only to have her signed confessions
spit back out onto the shell stamped edge
of South Carolina.

When she was little,
she wanted to grow up to be a wave,
so she threw herself against everything
she could,
until memories

shifted
and settled like dust
in between the ribs
of forgotten
ships.

Salt

Jackson doesn't notice at first that he's bleeding or that his index finger is radiating a sharp pain. It's a Saturday morning and he's washing a large cutting knife from dinner the night before. Lost in the warmth of the sudsy sink water and the muted light blanketing the kitchen, Jackson's attention drifts to the window overlooking the morning fog. It was nothing like ocean fog, which rolls off the tops of waves to cling to the dunes. Jackson is achingly familiar with the kind of grayness that belongs to the sea; how it can cloak a whole town. Before he can dispel the wisps of memories now creeping into his mind, he remembers how waves rumble when they break on land and how the sky is smeared charcoal when it's about to rain. Wading through these memories distracts him from the knife in his hand as he flexes his grip around the knife's edge, slicing the pad of his finger.

"Shit," he hisses as he registers the sting of the cut. Grabbing the crumpled hand towel on the counter next to him, Jackson attempts to quell the bleeding while also shoving the thoughts of the ocean from his mind. He tries not to visit those memories often, this dusty seafloor where the memories of a restless beach town and girl settle undisturbed like bones of ancient ships. Gripping the towel around his finger, he can't help but think about Annabel and how she only drank pink lemonade during thunderstorms because she claimed it tasted too sweet when it was sunny. He can't help but wonder if Annabel still can't sleep without the sea. Suddenly, all Jackson can taste is salt.

Jackson has been tethered to the beach town his entire life. He and his brother weren't born in there but their mother was, and she wanted to cradle their childhood in sand dunes and driftwood. So every year, she took the boys and their father to the pale green house on the beach,

that her parents had settled right in the yawn of the Atlantic Ocean. Though Jackson's father could only ever stay for a week or so sporadically throughout the summer, Grace loved planting her family back in her home soil each summer. She woke the boys each misty morning, long before the dawn had spilled over the horizon and led them down to water. Burying their toes in sludgy sand and chilly foam, they caught sand dollars that the high tide waves flung to shore. Sprinting ahead of their mother with their bright orange bucket full of treasures, the boys tumbled into the kitchen where, if he wasn't back in the city, their father would be waiting, coffee brewed and stove tops flickering to life. The kitchen breathed to life each morning with the sound of bacon popping on the stove and the boys smacking their lips with honey, butter and biscuits.

Humidity strangled the afternoon and the brothers played with the other children whose families were also tied to that town. They played in the ocean, trying to swallow waves whole to prove they could conquer the world and mapped the town with their bikes, always ducking into the ice cream shop for bubblegum scoops that slipped down the sides of their cones, made their fingers sweet and stained their bicycle handles. Doors were never locked and the group of kids blew in and out of each other's houses, tearing through kitchens in sandwich-making frenzies during lunchtime. Sleepovers were common, where blankets and pillows were piled on someone's living room floor, and it was a tangle of sun-browned limbs and scabbed knees as the girls and boys sprawled on the floor and couches. The adults usually shadowed the children, grilling out at each other's houses, dropping in to share bottles of wine as the evening smudged the horizon into darkness. Meanwhile, the children drifted to sleep as their parents' voices floated through the screen doors from the porch. This happened usually on the nights that vibrated with the unspoken feeling that tomorrow would come too fast, that the summer was

passing too quickly and that whatever magic had happened during that day would never be felt again.

Though many children were only visitors, there were a few who lived in the town year round. Annabel was one of them. Jackson has known Annabel the entirety of his life. Their mothers grew up as neighbors and their friendship never wavered, tethered to each other by the shared experience of living in a town that expanded and contracted as the seasons changed. While Jackson's mother, Grace, shook off her small hometown long enough to attend college in a mid-sized city and decide to settle there, Annabel's mother, Olivia, worked tirelessly as a waitress at the crab shack that flooded full of churchgoers each Sunday afternoon.

The summer Jackson's mother married his father at the age of 23 was the same summer Annabel's mother had finally saved enough money to buy her own cottage at the edge of town. The cottage was worn ragged after years of storms and neglect but Annabel's mother was relentless in her struggle to tame the unruly shingles and coax the sand out every corner. Jackson's parents exchanged vows under the oak tree next to their church but after the ceremony and reception, the wedding party gathered at Olivia's cozy home, nestled in sand dunes. The groomsmen filled the downstairs bathtub with bags of gas station ice and beer while the bridesmaids scattered various sized hurricane glasses on the porch, peeling back the night's darkness with their glow. Squishing into one rocking chair, Annabel and Jackson's mothers – bride and maid of honor – were a tangle of limbs and salt-sprayed hair and pinky-promises that they would rock their children to sleep on this porch every summer. Next summer, their words would ring true as both infant Jackson and Annabel, born months apart, would spend hours in their mothers' arms, calmed by the motion of the rocking chair and the lullaby of the waves returning to shore.

For Jackson, the ocean marked time. The salt-stained months he spent living there fragmented his life in the way that always made it easy to keep track of the years. While Jackson's presence ebbed and flowed in and out of Annabel's life, the ocean did not. It was an omnipresent force. She learned to tell time by the tides, to measure her days in how far the water lapped up the beach and how deep the tidal pools sunk into the shore. Her mother raised her on sandcastle fairy tales, where princesses didn't need princes and glass slippers would be impractical to wear while fending off dragons. She never spoke of Annabel's father.

Olivia made colored glass sea creatures and sold them in her store, named Annabel Lee's Sea Treasures, which consisted of the front two rooms of the house she had worked so hard to revive. Painted the same pale yellow of the crowds of sea oats that covered the dunes, the store was a cozy hub of worn mismatched armchairs and ottomans snuggled between bookcases. The shelves were littered with animals, a zoo made of smooth glass that the sea spent years licking, chewing and spitting back out. Catching the sun's rays, the figurines cast colored puddles across the room. Jackson and Annabel would sometimes lay under the cash register table, a slanted round oak table wedged in the back corner, to watch the beach town mothers flit in and out of the store. The women swapped soft murmurs of gossip for iced tea that Annabel's mother brewed each morning and again each afternoon as they sunk into the chairs, drawn by the steady clicking of the air conditioning unit and Annabel's mother.

Olivia was a woman of lilting laughs, with a gentle belief that little girls should be raised on shimmering things like poetry and magic and solid things like the moon and freshly plucked strawberries. As a result, her daughter was something a little wild, a little wave-tossed, and seemed to speak the same language as the ocean. Annabel breathed magic into Jackson's summers that were winding blurs of sun-soaked days and broken only by thunderstorms.

The summer children had a ritual, passed down from Annabel's mother that she said had been passed down from her own mother. Thunder and lightning sliced the muggy air and sharpened the waves as they threw themselves violently against the shoreline. It was one of the few moments the kids finally stilled, their frantic energy quelled by their fascination with the clouds rolling in as they sat on the front porch of Annabel Lee's and drank pink lemonade. Afterwards, they swarmed the beach to scour for pebbles of sea glass. Pink Lemonade Storms, that's what Jackson and his friends called them. The days were punctuated with tangy pink lemonade, flavored by salt breezes and now, Jackson was stung with reminder of moments with a girl he hadn't seen in years.

"I used to be a mermaid," Annabel confessed to Jackson once as they crouched by a jelly fish that had washed onto shore and dried in the sun, poking it with sticks more out of impulse than curiosity.

"No you didn't," Jackson replied, eyeing her. "You don't have a tail. Or gills." They had both just turned eight – he in March, she in June – and he had decided it was time to stop playing pretend games or make believe.

"Was too," she shrugged. "My mom told me that she wanted a baby but couldn't find one up here so she swam down to the mermaid king and begged him real bad and so he gave her me. I grew legs but I still have the gills."

"Liar."

"I swear. My hair covers them. Wanna see?" She began to gather her tangled hair and as Jackson leaned closer, despite his very firm belief that there was no way she used to be a mermaid but maybe just in case — she yanked away and ran down the beach. "Only if you catch

me," tumbled over her shoulder with her laughter and off he went, feet slapping on sand as he chased after her.

That night, when his mother slipped in his room to say goodnight, Jackson's words rushed out hot and fast.

"Annabel says she used to be a mermaid until her mom got her from the mermaid king and Mom, that's not true."

"Maybe she wasn't a mermaid," replied his mother, smoothing his hair and wondering to herself how it's possible protect fragile things – like little girls who believe in being mermaids instead of being fatherless. " But, I wouldn't be terribly surprised if she came from somewhere as fantastic as a mermaid kingdom, would you?" Jackson didn't answer and his mother sat in the dark, whispering stories of underwater palaces wrapped in seaweed and stroking her son's hair until he fell asleep.

"Honey? Are you okay?" A voice breaks into Jackson's awareness. Startled, he realizes he's still standing in his kitchen holding a towel to his finger. Checking to see if the bleeding has stopped – it has – he turns to address the sleep-rumpled woman staring curiously at him from the other side of the counter.

"Yeah, I'm sorry. I cut my finger. It's fine, just a lot of blood," he responds, demonstrating the situation by showing her his blood-stained towel and hand.

"Ouch," she winces. "I'm sorry that's not a great promise to this day. I'm going to get ready and we can leave soon?"

Jackson nods in agreement and Katherine walks back into his bedroom. They've been dating for several months now and her parents are in town for the weekend. He hasn't met them in person yet and he and Katherine are supposed to leave soon to pick up them up from the

airport. Up until this morning, Jackson has been nervous about meeting her parents and apprehensive about the gravity that this weekend presented to their relationship that he sometimes still felt unsure about. In fact, Jackson muses, he is unsure most of the time about most things. It's a careful mixture of hesitancy, wariness and general distrust of the permanence of other people.

It is profound perhaps, how someone can leave such a thumbprint on your life. Jackson has mulled over this thought for years as he realized that the significance of someone else can be so overwhelming it craters the once-familiar landscape of who you were, who are you, who you might have been. The ocean may have fragmented his life but it was Annabel that threaded it together, navigating the seemingly endless cycle of tides; Mother to child, shore to sea, lost to found to lost again. Annabel textured his life, roughened the edges that otherwise would have been dull and smoothed the ridges caused by heart aches as they both navigated childhood and adolescence.

The police had been interested in Jackson when it happened. He had been the last to see her and that haunts a person, to be the last connection between someone else and the world. They were newly seventeen, balanced on the edge between childhood and adulthood. It was late July and the summer was winding down, gasping out its last heated days as the beach town stuttered through the end of its busy season.

"It was a normal night," that's how Jackson had to retell that story countless times to his parents, his brother, his friends, Annabel's mother, the police. Annabel had been perched on the edge of his boardwalk, neck craned to look at the shy constellations that hung delicately in the sky. Wind whipped her hair around her neck and Jackson was on his back soaking up the last of the warmth that seeped out of the wood and through his thin t-shirt.

"Don't you think that the ocean is the earth's heartbeat?" she asked him, barely pausing before the words tumbled out, scraping against her lips. "That's what you hear in seashells, the earth's pulse, the waves, right?"

"Maybe?" Jackson was on the edge of sleep, anchored only by Annabel's voice. "What does that make our heartbeats then?" He wasn't expecting an answer and almost rolled over to stand up and head home but she flopped down next to him and planted her hand on his chest.

"I mean, ours aren't insignificant but they're just so small. Especially when you look at all this."

"Be careful," Jackson warns. "Your gills are showing."

"I just wonder what it all means, if we can't ever be…" trailing off, Annabel's words were barely heard above the sound of the tumble of the waves rolling onto land in front of them, blanketed in darkness. Several moments passed before she plucked the words out that she had been searching for. "Infinite. Endless. How do we compare to something that's as ancient as the ocean?"

Jackson gently wrapped his fingers around her wrist and the sailor knotted rope bracelets that she had wore until they grew saturated with salt water and frayed apart. They lay there, listening to the low thrum of Jackson's heart and rise, fall, rise of his chest.

"Maybe your heart pumps salt water instead of blood. You're more mermaid than not sometimes."

"Is that all I am? How stupid," she responds flatly.

"Excuse me?" He props himself up on an elbow to look at her more carefully. "What's up, Bel? Is something going on?"

"I'm just frustrated, I think," she sighs, eyes trained up at the web of stars above them. "My whole life has been anchored right here, in this town, in that house. I love my home, don't get me wrong, I do but sometimes…I get this *ache* to be something else, someone else, somewhere else. Do you know what I'm saying? Like maybe, just maybe, you weren't necessarily built for the space you were given."

"I guess," Jackson hummed in response. "It's hard to imagine this place without you though. What would it even look like?"

"Lucky you 'cause you'll probably never have to know," she sighed as Jackson eased onto his back again. She wiggled her fingers on his chest as they both settled into a warm silence under the star littered sky, and the ocean inhaled and exhaled softly beyond the dunes. When he woke a few hours later under a lilac stained sky, Annabel was gone. It wasn't until still hours later after her mother called asking if she had spent the night that dread pressed heavy on his chest where her hand had been. He's not sure if it ever lifted.

They hadn't stayed long after that night, just long enough to exhaust the hope that anyone would discover what had happened to her. No one ever found anything solid. Not the police who searched for weeks until they lost interest and leads so she melted into just another missing girl from a sleepy town who wanted to wake up in a different place, with a different roof over her head and frankly, ma'am, without a body, there's little we can do. Not her friends, the sun-sticky-salt-fragranced children who were now almost adults, who had spent their lives playing in the kingdom she had built and then abandoned. Not Jackson's father who spent weeks driving to all the neighboring towns, bringing Annabel's picture to hotels, grocery stores, gas stations and restaurants, asking if anyone had seen her recently. Her picture is still folded tight in the glove box of his truck and he can't shake the compulsion to ask each gas station clerk every time he

fills up. No one knows how desperately the hope clings to him besides Grace, who found the faded photo some years after that summer. She had been searching for the tire gauge and upon seeing the smiling faces of the now-lost girl and her now-broken son, she shattered all over again on the cracked leather of the passenger seat.

Everyone theorized possible outcomes that seemed to shrivel in the stagnant air that seemed to overwhelm the town in the weeks after her disappearance. Annabel had sometimes liked to go for morning swims. Perhaps the current was too brutal that day though Jackson still struggled to accept the idea that anything was fiercer than Annabel or that waves would betray her like that. The walls of her room were plastered with meticulously cut out magazine pictures of places she had wanted to travel; the cliffs of Malta, Scotland's Arthur's Seat, Alaskan glaciers, a Mongolian village, the Sahara at night time. Perhaps she was a little too fleet-hearted for being stuck in this town, people would whisper behind Olivia's back. Poor girl, without a father, barely enough money for her to attend a community college in the fall even if she lived at home, she was too bright for this place. Sometimes, Jackson thinks of her, still the young girl at seventeen, curled up in a train compartment, rattling through the country side, on to the next station, the next stop, the next great adventure.

Jackson passed the days drifting, aimlessly riding his bike or sitting with Olivia on her front porch for hours. Annabel's Sea Treasures remained open but in name only as currents of people moved through bringing food, organizing search parties to scour the nearby marshes and flyer nearby towns and fielding calls from shallowly interested local papers whose attention was caught by the tragic story of a pretty girl vanishing in the middle of the night.

"I hate that they're saying she vanished," Olivia sighed one morning, overhearing Grace's heated phone exchange with a reporter. "That implies there's nothing left. Poof. Wiped clean."

Jackson nodded. It felt like the air still hummed with Annabel's presence.

"It just seems like something should have stopped…or changed," he managed around the rock settled in the base of his throat.

"I know," Olivia answered, pausing slightly before continuing. "That's why she loved the ocean, you know? It was always there, day in, day out. Tides are predictable; she was obsessed with charting the times for high and low tides because that steadiness gave her comfort. I think that part of her would also find comfort in the fact that big things like the sea kept up its tide schedule in moments like this."

Olivia gazed out over the water as it converged with the sky, mirroring its soft blue. It was a sailor's day, not a cloud marring the expanse of sky, the kind of day that Annabel would say was definitely too sweet for pink lemonade.

There was nothing to bury that summer and Olivia was enraged at the idea of a funeral.

"That's too sterile, too clinical," she argued; voice gathering momentum, speed and volume. "Burying an empty coffin won't magically shoot me the next stage of grief. I need to feel everything, every moment she's not here. I need to feel it. Don't you understand that? We should wait."

"Honey," Grace soothed. "We aren't trying to erase her memory. We just want to try to–"

Olivia had cracked open then, dissolving in a violent shower of anger and tears. Grabbing the nearest figurine – a purple dolphin, arching into the air off a wave's crest – she stormed out the door and hurled it into the dunes. Grace watched in silence as Olivia dismantled the store,

sweeping up armfuls of her creations – some tumbling to the wooden floorboards and shattering – she launched every one she could over the porch railing. Eventually she depleted the store and stood, chest heaving, hands gripping the railing, head hanging, shuddering with sobs. Grace walked up behind her best friend, the woman she grew up with and then grew her sons up alongside Olivia's daughter, and wrapped her arms around her stomach and held her as she cried. The next day, Jackson, his brother and father swept up the delicate flakes of colored glass and attempted to salvage some from the sand. Though most figurines were too disfigured or covered in spider web fissures to save, there was a blue sea turtle that Jackson impulsively slipped into his pocket. He forgot about it for months after until one day that winter, when he finally shook out his backpack, the sea turtle tumbled out from its depths. He's not sure if he still has it or not.

Grace had lingered after that summer when autumn crept in, moving into Annabel's house so Olivia wasn't sleeping alone. Each night the women walked together along the shoreline, silent and concentrating fiercely on balancing the tightrope between land and sea. Eventually, Jackson's mother returned home and the family never went back. Jackson isn't even completely sure if they ever sold their house or if it sits empty in the dunes, patiently waiting for something to happen as the tides swept in and out. Maybe, one day, the ocean would erode that house, that town, that store of glass creatures until the memory of a girl would crumble along with everything else into the sea.

The sound of Katherine rummaging through her purse as she walks back into the kitchen makes Jackson realize he's still leaning against the counter.

"Are you ready?" Katherine asks, walking back into the kitchen as she rummages in her purse for her keys. "I don't want to be late and they land soon."

"Yep, let me just grab my wallet," he replies, clearing his throat and shaking off the heavy feeling of drowning that's settled on his shoulders. As he goes to retrieve his wallet and check his reflection one last time before meeting his girlfriend's parents, Jackson will briefly and silently splinter over his memories of salt-glazed summers and the girl who loved pink lemonade.

Epilogue

if
the ocean
can calm itself
so can you.
we
are both
salt water
mixed with
air

-meditation

– Nayyirah Waheed, *Salt*

For me, it is natural to believe women are made of salt water. The ocean has been an omnipresent force my entire life, always on the edge of my subconsciousness and is synonymous with home. I have been cradled in the presence of the sea for as long as I can remember and influences my own writing themes. As such, I have always been drawn to literature that connects with the ocean. It wasn't until I became interested in the ocean's role in exploring gender roles that I noticed a thread between various female authors stretching from Austen to Woolf. It was after noting these authors' works. I began to grow curious about how the ocean functioned in their works and thus, this project was born.

As a woman in the 21st century, I struggle sometimes with the disparities in distance I feel to women who lived in hundreds of years before me. While some practices concerning gender roles have diminished – the domestication of madness seems like a far-off time period though women still lack autonomy over their own health care and reproductive choices – the experiences of those women as represented in the literature I examined impact my life today. It is incredibly easy to simultaneously safely far-removed yet also uncomfortably close to the issues these women authors faced and struggled with. Though Virginia Woolf's strong critiques of the

traditional gender roles can feel like a starkly different social belief than Austen's subtle subversion of the marriage plot, both women pushed the boundaries of the definition of the female identity. They, and other authors like Charlotte Bronte and Kate Chopin, were able to explore complicated themes of madness, independence, identity and the pressure of society's expectations through the ocean.

Using the ocean as a thematic tool to reject traditional gender roles was, in itself, a rebellion. Repurposing the ocean as a female empowering essence from its previous form as male-dominated entity allowed these female authors to push boundaries further than before. In doing this, the authors gained access to the depths of their characters' sub consciousnesses and readers were given access to their most intimate desires, despairs, and passions. Previously, this world was veiled from society as women were continually oppressed and limited by their families and society. Yet, in literature and by using the sea, female characters, beginning with Anne Elliot, became the voices for the silenced half of society.

"Salt" and the interlude poetry were my attempt to reflect themes I had encountered in my research and analysis. Each poem was written with the intent to connect the various sections by examining overarching ideas presented by the authors or time periods. While "Salt" had a male character, I would argue that Annabel is the core of the story. It is her connection with the ocean that drives the narrative and Jackson's reaction to her disappearance is the background noise to the real conflict of the story, which is Annabel's struggle with feeling trapped in a place that constantly ebbs, and flows around her while she remains stagnant.

It seems justified to me that the ocean was reclaimed as a feminine entity by these authors. For decades, men had dominated the sea. It was conquered while also being revered. It

represented something wild and also something that could be tamed. The parallels between the ocean and the landlocked women characterized in the literature of those great female authors are poignant and resonate still today. Each work examined in this project furthered my understanding of the evolution of the female identity and the methods the authors used to not only expand on the concepts of those who came before them but to widen the door for those who followed. Each writer fought to convey not only the limits imposed by society on women's identity but the formidable strength and bravery it took to overcome those limits in the quest for one's true self. Truly, women are made of salt water.

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Publications

The Hothouse Literary Magazine, "They Say He Has a Monster," Austin, TX. May 2017

The Nocturnal, "Our Souls," Austin, TX. May 2015

Honors

Texas Exes Forty Acres Scholarship Program

The Stamps Family Foundation Scholarship

About the Author

Caroline Read is a senior Plan II Honors and Creative Writing Certificate student at The University of Texas at Austin. She was born in Washington D.C. but grew up in Dallas, TX and graduated from Highland Park High School. She loves traveling to new places, meeting new people and trying new food. After graduation, she plans to travel to Australia, New Zealand and South East Asia for several months. In the future, she hopes to complete an MFA in creative writing.